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Abstract

The role of the teacher who seeks to develop individuals who can solve problems, face issues, make decisions, and cope with pressures has at least three facets. The teacher becomes a questioner rather than a teller, encouraging rather than stopping the thinking process; a stage-setter making judgments about the types and varieties of experiences needed to challenge children to think as capably as their development allows; a scene-shifter making decisions about the auspicious time to change the children's source of experience. Each facet implies skillful diagnostic procedures grounded not only in maturation and development and personality theory but also in development of thinking in children. The focus in the teaching process changes from covering material to making discoveries. Cues for content are given by the children with the sensitive teacher catching and using them. Emphasis on right and wrong answers must give way to choices, or alternatives, that can be tested by their consequences. The teacher must learn to plan with children so that they have opportunities to set their own goals for trying out. Such a discovery, trying-out process can help to stimulate creativity which the teacher fosters by treating school as a here-and-now process, not a period of preparation or waiting for. Such principles are difficult to apply because they require the teacher to be tolerant of ambiguity, of a certain amount of disorder, and of dissimilar products that cannot be compared to one another. (JS)

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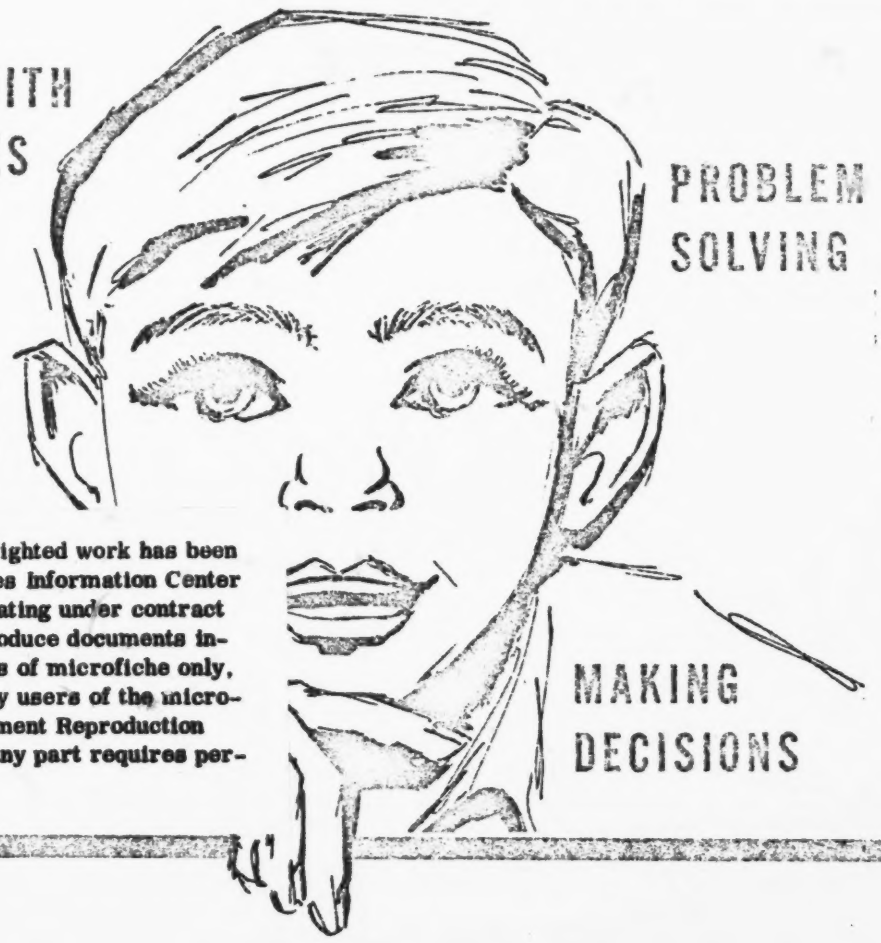

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VITAL TEACHING

This morning my neighbor left in my mail box her seven-year-old son's accumulated school work that had been sent home for his parents to assess. Pete is repeating the first grade although he is an unusually creative, alert, sensitive human being. He has been busying himself this fall with the following activities: (a) filling pages with the alphabet, copied over and over; (b) writing a few simple sentences and words; (c) coloring neatly dittoed pictures of light signals, children at play, pumpkins and witches; (d) drawing pictures; (e) filling pages with numerals, copied over and over; (f) completing pages of arithmetic work books that require "drawing a line to," "circling," or "coloring."

EVALUATION OF TEACHING GOALS

The purpose of this article is to stimulate all of us to ask ourselves what our teaching goals are and then to assess our practices in terms of these goals. Let's turn back a moment to Pete's work. If we assume developing skill is one of our goals, what specific growth in skills does Pete's work reveal? If our goal is to teach children to write legibly, we would have to say our methods are not accomplishing this with Pete, for the last line of each of his pages of alphabet and numerals is much inferior to the first line. If our goal is to teach him the alphabet so that he may use it in making words, we would have to note that he has written only twenty-nine words so far and has composed only three sentences. When we examine his art work and compare it with his preschool drawings, we note he has learned to stay inside the lines of the dittoed pictures, but his own pictures have become increasingly stereotyped. In fact, five of his six pictures are repetitions of the same theme and almost duplications of each other; while at three and four years of age, Pete's drawings were fluid and varied and revealed a

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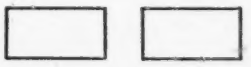
vivid imagination. (The sixth picture was a tracing of his hand.)

Pete is a child who has always been curious about numbers. Much of his preschool play was concerned with numbers. When he was working with me in the garden, he counted the tools we were using, the plants we were setting out, the flowers we picked. As we drove along one day and passed a camping trailer, four-year-old Pete began to figure out how his family, numbering five, could all sleep in the trailer's bunks. During this third year of his schooling, which includes kindergarten, he spends some time each day in the following type of activity:

CIRCLE CORRECT NUMBER OF BOXES:



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Twenty such pages were sent home; there was only one in which Pete was asked to do something original with numbers. Of course children have to learn to combine their understanding of numbers with the shorthand of arithmetic, but is this the most effective way to accomplish this goal? Are we teaching a rote, stereotyped response or are we teaching children to think? Let me illustrate the basis for my question from another first-grade child's response to a workbook assignment. The page looked like this:

□□□□□+□=—. □+□□□□□=—.

Instructions were given to repeat this at the bottom of the page. One child drew this instead:

□□□+□□□=6. □□□□+□□=6.

The designer of the book was trying to teach an abstract concept which we call the commutative property of arithmetic. The child knew this concept and had much additional knowledge about *six*. He had not followed instructions and received a zero for his "advanced" thinking.

Returning to Pete and his school experiences this fall, we have found that Pete is not learning adequately the skills that are being taught through rote, stereotyped processes. Since we know Pete, we can make some assumptions about the effects of these processes upon him as a total personality. Pete has learned to mistrust his own responses. Insistence on a stereotyped response has caused him to give up the responses that he had before his school experience. He used to reach out for books; he insisted on doing his homework as I did mine; he took chances on "guessing" (hypothesizing) about the causes of happenings in his world. Today these responses have disappeared. Some will explain Pete's restricted behavior by the fact that he is now seven years old instead of three or four. Perhaps seven-year-olds came to be the way they are because the teaching processes that we have used have produced this type of behavior.

Today our goals are not limited to growth in skill. We used to believe children were empty vessels to be filled, the mind a blank tablet, the impulses wicked and in need of constant correction. Our teaching methods were aptly tailored to fit this concept. Today we see children as whole, integral human beings who grow "all of a piece" and whose growth comes by associating with challenging human beings whose sensitivities are refined to stimulate the uniqueness that is the inner core of each self.

We view learning as a process of reaching out to discover the nature of the unique world each of us inhabits. This means that we have to keep intact the native urge of questing and to encourage the child to trust his own risk-taking behavior. If we accept these premises about children and the way they learn, we must examine our teaching processes to see if they are appropriate and effective for these purposes.

In many ways, elementary teachers are doing a commendable job in the face of unbelievably difficult working conditions that include a steadily rising average class size, irresponsible and unin-

formed criticisms of the total educational system, a lack of financial support, and a bemeaning of education as a profession requiring specialized knowledge and competency. To the extent, however, that we are not utilizing our specialized professional competency, to the extent that we are being badgered to use stereotyped patterns in teaching as represented by Pete's experience, we need to re-examine our processes.

We urgently need today thinking, risk-taking people, people who trust their own responses. We need intuitive thinkers. We need people who can tolerate ambiguity, who are open and free in their responses to others. Problem solving, facing issues, making decisions, and coping with pressures require more than the skills of knowing how to think one's way through these processes. They require the "will to," the desire, the conative quality of personality that responds to these functions as challenges. The rest of this article will describe some teaching processes that encourage this quality of cognitive and conative response.

ROLE OF THE TEACHER

The role of the teacher who seeks to develop risk takers—free, open, thinking individuals who trust their own responses—has at least three facets. The *teacher becomes a questioner* rather than a teller, and his questions are fashioned to encourage rather than stop the thinking process. Thus, "how" and "why" questions become relevant. Secondly, the *teacher becomes a stage-setter.* He makes judgments about the types and varieties of experiences needed by any particular group of children to challenge them to think as capably as their development allows. Thirdly, the *teacher becomes a scene-shifter.* He makes judgments about the auspicious time to move the children's source of experience from one scene to another. In all of these facets of the role of the teacher are implied skillful diagnostic procedures that are grounded not only in maturation and development and personality theory but also in development of thinking in children, especially young children. The goal of the teacher, we assume, is to see that experiences are being lived which are mind-stretching, challenging, but not threatening.

CURRICULUM FOR THE CHILD

Piaget's 30-year study of children's thinking at the Institute of Educational Sciences in Geneva, Switzerland, gives us many leads that should be carefully analyzed as we make decisions about the appropriateness of curriculum for young children.[1]

Hilda Taba's research on thinking in elementary school children, now being carried on under the auspices of the U.S. Office of Education, has identified six levels or stages of thinking. The simplest thinking function is gathering information; second is grouping two or more pieces of information; third is developing categories; fourth is giving reasons or explanations for happenings; fifth is making inferences; and sixth is deriving principles or generalizations. Taba has been able to devise teaching strategies to help children gain skill in acquiring more complex levels of thinking as they work together. She does this through the types of questions asked of and responses given by the teacher. She has found that some children require many more exposures than others before they are able to progress from one level to a higher level.

DISCOVERY AS PART OF THE TEACHING PROCESS

Discovery is a key word in the teaching process we are describing. The focus changes from covering material to making a discovery. One teacher describes how she leads her kindergarten children to discoveries in the following manner: "The first time a child brought a pampas grass plume to

[1] A provocative review of his work may be found in the following: Boehm, Leonore. "Exploring Children's Thinking." *Elementary School Journal* 61: 363-73; April 1961.

school I thanked him for the lovely pony tail. The children laughed but caught on quickly. Yesterday a toadstool was an umbrella, a milking stool, a compote, a small house with a tall chimney, a bell, a golf tee, a beany with a tall feather, a pen holder with a pen in it, a table, and more." [2] Can't you imagine the delightful discussions this group of children and their teacher have and the language facility that is being gained by allowing their imaginations to play?

Another teacher tells of encouraging her second-grade children to bring in any writing that they have done at home and would like to share with their classmates. These sharings lead to many discoveries for the children. One child brought in a rhyme she had composed. Then other children wanted to make rhymes. This led to a rhyme book.[3]

Both of these teachers speak of the rich experiential life of their classes. They take walks and observe the life around them; they go to the park; they go out in the schoolyard and use their senses by listening, observing, touching, and smelling what is near at hand. One class adopted a tree outside their classroom window and made a record of all the changes in that tree's life from fall to spring—the different birds and insects that came and went as well as the coloration and falling of the leaves and the renewed life when the sap began running in the spring. From such an experience, a child collects enough information and groups and categorizes it so that he learns to make inferences and generalizations that have meaning for him.

Thinking about the illustrations just described, we come to another quality in discovery teaching. The cues for the content of the discovery are given by the children. The teacher who is sensitive catches these cues and uses them. Cues are seldom communicated directly. As teachers we have to become skillful in oblique techniques. "You know what you were telling me about those big old birds out at sea?" may mean, "Let's read about those birds again."

TRYING OUT AS PART OF THE TEACHING PROCESS

Another key word in the teaching process we are describing is *trying out*. If we take this seriously, it means we must give up so much emphasis on right and wrong answers and must substitute choices, or alternatives, that can be tested by their consequences. How else can we educate our young to trust their responses? School should be a place where mistakes may be freely made, amply clarified, and then forgotten. One teacher of a sixth grade is encouraging her pupils to write quickly, without censoring their writing, the feelings they had as they came to school in the morning—their reactions to the sunrise or the rain or whatever they were thinking or feeling at the time. This is a group of very bright boys and girls. The teacher is finding many of the children cannot write down their thoughts spontaneously. She gets such questions as: "Do I have to make an outline? I don't know how to spell the words I want to use. Shall I use ink or pencil? Are these going to be graded?" Many spend most of their time scratching out what they have written. These children have been trained carefully in the forms of writing for six years and many have lost—at least temporarily—the desire or ability to write spontaneously.

One facet of a teacher's use of trying out, which is central to a thinking individual, is planning with children so that they have opportunities to set their own goals. One teacher who was in a workshop last summer in which he had to decide his own goals writes about his experience this fall. "When I began with my 40 fifth- and sixth-graders this fall, I told them of my experience during the summer. That is, I had set my goals and, since they had meaning for me, I was interested in what I was studying. This was better than having someone else tell me what to study. What I learned would stick to me better than what someone else told me to learn. I suggested to the children that they each think about what they

[2] Jan Meyer, San Miguel Elementary School, Mt. Diablo, California.

[3] Marjorie Manko, Sutro School, San Francisco, California.

would like to do during the coming year. After handing out a sheet on which to list their goals, we came up with "temporary goals." Then we listed the "helps" to attain our goals. What has happened since the first week? Certainly we have not departed altogether from the teacher-dominated curriculum the children have been used to, but we planned as a group such things as room arrangement, how we should be graded in Spanish, and some others that do not come to mind. Most of all, we are not embroiled in a 'bunch of rules' and in class dissension. The spirit of the class is good. I have tried to communicate with each child. I know I have failed many times due to my own handicaps; but when communication does exist, then thinking can go on. Thinking has to involve teacher and children in an easy exchange of contributing and receiving. A teacher has to be interested in the pupil, believe in him, accept his contributions. Then children will think with you. . . . The teacher has to be a free person internally. In such a state of mind, he can think, be creative." [4]

STIMULATION OF CREATIVITY

A discovery, trying-out process will help to stimulate creativity. The teacher can help foster creative approaches by treating school as if it is a real, here-and-now process—not a period of preparation or waiting for. I would like to describe in detail a way which one creative teacher [5] has contrived so that her fifth-grade class feels school is real and important right now. This is presented as only one of a score of ways that are available. It is presented in the hope that it will stimulate others to think of their own ways to bring vitality to the period in which we are teaching.

This fifth grade is organized so that, each week, one fourth of the class assumes specific leadership roles in the class. These roles are not assigned because of quality of work or conduct. They rotate, and each child anticipates when he will assume one of the roles. In this group is the "teacher of the week" whose functions include teaching every day for fifteen minutes. The teacher of the week is free to select any subject he wishes to teach. He is faced with delimiting his subject so that he may present his topic competently. He also has to consider continuity from one day to the next. He is responsible for preparing any written materials he needs to distribute to the class to amplify his teaching.

On Friday, which is the culmination day of the week's work, the teacher of the week gives the class a test which he has prepared. He evaluates the test with the teacher to see how well he has presented his ideas and whether he has taught what he thinks he has. He also prepares a written summary of his week's work. For instance, one teacher of the week decided he wanted to do his research on prehistoric animals. When he found how interesting the cave-painting books were, he found himself using this as his area for teaching. The teacher of the week experiences learnings in language arts and research and assumes partial responsibility not only for his own learning but also for that of his classmates. He also has a bulletin board at his disposal to design.

The leadership group also includes "editors of the week" in social studies, communicative arts, reading, and science. Each editor has bulletin board space available to him. The editors' work includes a variety of activities, such as editing routine assignments; developing criteria for editing more complicated assignments; and reading written work to ascertain areas that need to be retaught. The teacher spends considerable time with this group helping them understand their complicated tasks.

Still another role included in this is that of two "art editors." These two people are not responsible for any class assignments. Their total purpose is to spend the week experimenting in the field of art media. On Friday, they share their exploration with the class. They also prepare, sometime during the week, one art project in which the total class participates. Parents have agreed to see that these two students have opportunities to participate in whatever community art experiences are available. They may be taken to an exhibit at a nearby museum or may visit a library in which are deposited some rare old volumes.

The "librarian of the week" is responsible for encouraging the growth of a small, selective room library and for promoting circulation of the books.

Several interesting developments are noteworthy. Every student regardless of his specialized function is keeping up with the formal class work. He now does his work because he senses purpose in his learning. He is part of that which is going on around him. Learning in this class is becoming more and more integrated; the artificial lines we draw between social studies, science, language arts, and reading disappear as children find and attack the problems in which they have interest.

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[4] Paul Streicher, Oakland City Schools, Oakland, California.

[5] Mrs. Joan Bailey, San Miguel Elementary School, Mt. Diablo, California.

These boys and girls are discovering something significant about themselves. When they are faced with an instructional block of time to use as they wish, many of them are lost. They have to use their own ideas and for some of the pupils this is something that requires displacement of former learnings. They have the opportunity now to "sweat out an idea" and to experience the joy that comes from seeing an idea come to fruition.

The children have worked long enough within this structure to begin to anticipate their turns and are now beginning to generate ideas before they come up for a leadership role. They are learning how plentiful are the resources available to a person who wants to learn. One of their most difficult tasks has been to fashion a piece of work small enough so that it can be successfully completed in a week's time. Such delimitation skills are needed throughout life.

The teacher's role in this type of teaching is changed from that of director to guide; from teller to questioner and stimulator. One of the most difficult roles of this particular teacher is to find time to help the children locate the materials they need, to find time to serve as resource person to all the ones who need her. Perhaps this gives us a cue for the use of teacher aides in a classroom.

CONCLUSION

Is this the new frontier in teaching? Perhaps! But I suspect that teachers who have been successful in their relationships with children have always used these processes. Today our knowledge of human development and of learning gives us the courage to reassert our faith in these practices, for they are congruent with all we know about children. They are difficult to apply for they require the teacher to be tolerant of ambiguity, of a certain amount of disorder, and of dissimilar products that cannot be compared with one another. The new frontier in education will really be upon us when we refuse to rate uniqueness as excellent, good, fair, or unsatisfactory.

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